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6 Synonyms

- 7 Developmental psychology; Evolutionary psy-
- 8 chology; Father absence; Life history theory

9 Definition

- 10 Predictions about how cues to accelerated life
- 11 history will be visible in maturation.

12 Introduction

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Jay Belsky had a breakthrough moment – in his own words "the best idea I would ever have" – early in his career while teaching a graduate seminar. Having been trained in traditional developmental psychological theories (Freudian, attachment theory, and social learning theory) he was familiar with the idea that good developmental trajectories followed naturally from positive parental involvement. Parents who were responsive, financially and emotionally secure, and possessed of an acceptable level of intellectual and social skills would produce children who were

similarly capable of love and social interaction 25 in later life. A paper by colleague Pat Draper 26 (Draper and Harpending 1988) changed all that. 27 Viewed from the perspective of life history theory, 28 human notions of good and bad parenting take a 29 back seat to effectiveness of passing genes on to 30 the next generation – and this is true whether you 31 are a human or a haddock. Viewed through this 32 radical lens, violent and abusive human parents 33 are preparing their offspring for a world where 34 trust and love will not be rewarded. The fact of 35 this being a social and moral evil says nothing 36 about its being a reproductive dead end. This 37 perspective, life history theory, has informed 38 most of Belsky's subsequent work.

Life History Theory

Life history theory is a set of well-validated 41 interlocking biological predictions about the dif- 42 ferential allocation of resources to different 43 fitness-related aspects of an organism's needs 44 throughout its life. It is well-validated across a 45 huge range of taxa. At the most basic level, organ- 46 isms can be impelled down slow or fast life history paths. Slow paths are ones that emphasize greater 48 time taken to reach maturity, the low acceptability 49 of risk, and other modifications to take advantage 50 of a predictable and supportive environment. On 51 the other hand, fast life histories are favored in 52 risky, dangerous environments where ultimate fit- 53 ness is increased by maturing early and favouring 54

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reproductive quantity over quality. From a gene's eye perspective, either set of strategies is as good as the other – both have been favored by selection to maximize fitness (Stearns 1976).

Human Development

Humans are obligate investors, and even minimum parental investment is still considerable. That said, there is plenty of opportunity for parents to cue offspring to a life of likely threats or opportunities. What Belsky realized was that what was traditionally regarded as bad parenting – e.g., unresponsive care-giving, spousal abuse, and frequent conflict was resulting in developmental trajectories that likely maximized that child's fitness later in life.

This concept is not unknown to popular culture. In the classic country and western song "A Boy Named Sue," the father abandons his son at age three after naming him in a way that will ensure daily conflict. When they meet, later in life, and fight, they are reconciled over the realization that this treatment toughened the son up for the life he was to lead – the song even mentions his speed of maturation. This pattern (minus the sentimental reconciliation) is a distillation of Belsky's key insight as it pertains to what others would regard as developmental insults. Specifically, early maturation should be predictable from what others would regard as bad parenting (Belsky et al. 1991).

The implications of this are profound. The organism can be viewed as a fitness maximizer who can be conceptualized as saying (not consciously) to itself, "given that I am born into an environment that is harsh and unforgiving, in which I can't take my time to choose the best mate, ensure mutual commitment, and invest time and energy in healthy pursuits and a small number of much cared for children; my best reproductive bet is to start reproducing early, be a lot less choosy about with whom I do this, and have as many offspring as possible given that their chances of survival to reproductive maturity are so much less than they could be in this untrustworthy and unpredictable world." The question then is – what sort of early cues might 100 set humans down one path rather than another. 101 Given the need for biparental investment in our 102 ancestral past, Belsky and others (e.g., Belsky 103 et al. 1991) hypothesized that father absence in 104 key developmental periods would predict earlier 105 maturation.

These sorts of predictions have been confirmed 107 strongly in females, but this is only part of the 108 story. The mechanisms are far from perfect, and 109 early calibrations of organisms to their likely envi- 110 ronments might go awry. Genes that underlie 111 these mechanisms may thus increase their fitness 112 by hedging their bets somewhat. This results in a 113 set of hypotheses about differential individual 114 susceptibility (Belsky et al. 2007). The observed 115 effect of this is that some children are likely to 116 appear more resilient to early markers of abuse 117 than others. This is what we do find. Some chil- 118 dren are highly reactive - with certain gene 119 markers underlying these individual 120 differences – and these children do both especially 121 poorly in adverse conditions and especially well 122 in supportive ones (Belsky 2012; Belsky and 123 Pluess 2013).

Conclusion

Belsky has summed up these insights in terms of 126 "biological gravity." Engineers cannot ignore the 127 force of gravity when designing a building. Evolution is, similarly, a force that cannot be ignored when considering how biological organisms are 130 designed. And, ultimately - this is cashed out in terms of differential survival of genes. The nature/ nurture debate itself needs to grow up.

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Cross-References

► Life History Theory	135
▶ Parental Investment Theory	136



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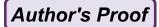
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